HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Queering the Classroom

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"There's too much gay shit in this class." I overheard a student make this comment right before I started my class. The course was titled Studies in Fiction; we were at Hostos Community College in the South Bronx. We were reading James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. As I made my way to the front of the classroom, the student reiterated that it was "way gay." His "too much gay shit" comment was said loudly and in a way that might elicit or gauge support. I heard another student agree with him. The rest of the students continued whatever discussions they were having. I put my bags down, as usual, greeted the class, as usual, and took attendance, as usual. Meanwhile, I thought to myself, "How shall I address this? Should I let it go and teach my lesson for the day?" By the time attendance was taken, I'd made my decision. I stood before the class and posed the question, "How much is too much?" They stared in silence. I moved to another side of the classroom and repeated, "How much is too much?" More silence and stares.

How much is too much?

In Studies in Fiction, *Giovanni's Room* was the fifth of the seven major works we were reading that semester. The previous four—James Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and Gabriel García Marquez's *The Innocent Eréndira*—did not directly deal with gay subject matter. The books to follow *Giovanni's Room* were Isabelle Allende's *The House of Spirits* and Octavia Butler's *The Parable of the Sower*. I needed to address this student's comments. Especially since up until that point we'd read three works

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written by white men, and I hadn't yet heard "There's too much white shit in this class."

In my evaluations for an English Composition class from a previous semester, a student wrote, "Great teacher, he helped me a lot, but the course was all about Black people. To [*sic*] bad." In that class, we'd read a total of twelve essays, only four written by Black writers navigating Blackness in America. Three of the other essays were by Latinx writers, one was by an Asian writer, and one by an Arab writer. Three were by white writers, two of whom weren't dealing with identity but with the impact of Google on our brains, and the research of a drug to treat and possibly cure Alzheimer's disease. The Black writers (Carol Anderson, James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, and Sojourner Truth) all wrote about racism in America. They brought the issue front and center and the classroom environment provided the space to explore what they spoke. And since all students were of color, except for one, they were navigating their own place in the world and in history in order to live the best lives they could. The one white student (who was an immigrant from Eastern Europe), who I assume also wrote the comment in their evaluation, once said to me after class, "We read Black essays because you're Black." (My students often expressed themselves very matter-of-factly.) I nodded. "Yes, and it's just as important for me to teach it because I'm Black, as it is important for you to read and study because you are not." Although I'm charged to teach composition and essay writing, if my students are going to be global citizens (one of the values of general education), they must learn who they are in this country and this world. Expanding what they read and explore to include racially and culturally diverse perspectives helps them to see themselves in the work as well as others. They experience the actual pluralistic society and world in which we inhabit. It also allows them to feel their worth from a cultural and racial lens.

But for the student who wrote the evaluation, whether my assumption as to who wrote it is correct or not, four essays by Black writers was too much. I can speculate that it was because of that student's value system, of what they thought was important or worth discussing in a composition class. I understand it. I, too, was exposed to white writer after white writer in my education, so I assumed that was the authority, and what should be taught in a classroom. So, that "too much" reaction encourages me to continue diversifying my syllabus so that all students can learn of the value of diverse voices. And since I embrace the queer as part of that diversity, I brought in my own essay, "Latino/a Visibility and a Legacy of Power and Love," published in *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, and work by Daisy Hernandez and other writers of color writing about queer subject matter. When my department chair saw the student's evaluation with

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the "all about Black people" comment, they shrugged it off as an isolated, partly dissatisfied student. I saw the comment as proof that our work to continue diversifying our syllabi needs to be ongoing.

Both experiences leave me with the question of how much is too much? How do I measure, curate, or balance out a syllabus when in addition to studying forms and genres, I'm also interested in bringing in an expansive experience in terms of identity, race, gender, queerness?

When I walked into my Studies in Fiction classroom that semester, I could see different races and cultures, and the Black, Latinx, Arab, and Asian students owned their identities. But I couldn't visibly identify anyone as queer, and no one admitted to being so. Toward the end of the semester, I found out that three of the students in the room identified as queer—two as gay and one as lesbian. Yet during the whole discussion about the Baldwin work and queerness in the classroom they didn't participate or "out" themselves. I don't think it's so much their job as the student to be out, but my job as the teacher to stand behind what I select for my class. So, as a Black, Afro-Latino, queer man it was a "no-brainer" to bring queer works into the classroom. Little did I know that when I didn't brush off the student's "too much gay shit" comment and continue with my lesson, but instead engaged his discomfort, I was also taking a stand for those students they later shared. I let them know that their sexual identity and their experience wasn't "too much" for our classroom. Our interactions and discussion that afternoon highlighted the ways in which "teaching Black" cannot leave out "teaching queer."

The student who made the statement owned up to his comments. He started by saying, "I don't mean any disrespect." Then, he went on to explain that he had never encountered LGBTQ content in any of his classes before. He admitted his discomfort. He didn't know how to respond to it without first addressing his own personal feelings about homosexuality. He said he grew up with the idea that being gay was wrong, bad, against God and nature. The same ideas I, too, had grown up with, I told him. We spent half the class talking about our feelings about queerness and it was in that lively and open conversation that I felt more assured of the value of diversifying my syllabus. It gave students a chance to articulate their ideas around queerness and to have those ideas challenged and/or affirmed. It ultimately allowed us to dive into Baldwin's text and understand his characters' relationship to their own sexual orientations, but also his story arc, character development, and the craft of fiction. That discussion provided the groundwork so that they could see the text in terms of studying fiction and learn the value of difference and how difference makes us smarter. After all, at the core of education is to learn.

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I was educated in an education system founded on white middle-class beliefs, values, and perspectives. White authors like Melville, Hawthorne, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald were all presented to me as simply literature. It never occurred to my undergraduate English professor to offer anyone but white authors to me, a Black, Puerto Rican student from the Bronx. She and others taught that the American experiences offered in those works were the norm, the standard, and what I should be striving to attain. I didn't realize how studying only those works (with very few women, as well) supported the erasure, and thus the value, of my experiences.

This was true, too, in the late 1980s when I came out. I loved reading books by David Leavitt, Edmund White, Felice Picano, Christopher Bram, and Andrew Holleran, who all wrote about a gay experience from a white perspective. Those books taught me a queerness that resonated with me but was different from my experience growing up in the Bronx and in New York City, the same city that many of them wrote about.

So, there was an absence of diversity in my education coupled with a hegemonic perspective that centered whiteness. As educators we know that that is only part of the story and as educators, we are charged to teach the full story.

In her *TedTalk*, "The Danger of a Single Story," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie speaks about her own education in Nigeria. She shares how the early education she received, devoid of her Nigerian culture, didn't allow her to value her experience as worthy of being in literature. She states, "I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather. . . . My characters also drank a lot of ginger beer because the characters in the British books I read drank ginger beer. . . . What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story. . . . I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify. Now, things changed when I discovered African books."

Adichie's attention to the ways in which literature can erase or can affirm and validate identity sets an important example for teachers of writing. In what ways do the text selections we make amplify or invisibilize certain experiences? How do we, by dint of our default choices, marginalize our students of color, and our queer students of color, who—like Adichie—also don't often see themselves in the literature? When our classrooms continue to replicate the normalization of white, middle-class, heterosexual stories, our students also normalize these stories as their own. When our students don't receive the kinds of affirmation that is par for the course for

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middle class, white, heterosexual people, we produce the kinds of context that make *any* attention to difference "too much."

When I began teaching in the City University of New York (CUNY) system—first at LaGuardia Community College, then at the College of Staten Island, and later at Hostos Community College—I looked at my classrooms of diverse students from working class families, and immigrants and children of immigrants from India, the Caribbean, Egypt, Mexico, Poland, and Africa. The fervor to be inclusive of my students' experiences and cultures within my syllabus came from my gut. I soon learned that there was a whole field called culturally relevant or responsive pedagogy (CRP). Many studies and books (including *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Clashes and Confrontations* by Lisa Scherff and Karen Spector) have documented that white-centered, homogeneous course content have often led many marginalized students (students of color, immigrant students, poor, working class students) to believe that they are incapable of achieving success in education. Those students have been taught that their experiences and perspectives do not have merit or value.

CRP is "a pedagogy that can broadly appeal to today's diverse college student population, embrace students' cultural perspectives and have a commitment to academic success for all, without the preoccupation with historical social inequities." CRP draws on the works of educators and scholars Gerald Mohatt and Frederick Erickson. Mohatt and Erickson published a study in 1977 called "The Social Organization of Participation Structures in Two Classrooms of Indian Students," where they observed teacher-student interactions and participation structures in Native American communities, and "found teachers who used language interaction patterns that approximated the students' home cultural patterns were more successful in improving student academic performance." Improved student achievement also was evident among teachers who used what they termed "mixed forms," a combination of Native American and Anglo language interaction patterns. They termed this instruction "culturally congruent." In essence, CRP can level the playing field for learning. CRP draws upon students' cultural knowledge to make classrooms and course materials more relevant and meaningful to them. In its simplest definition, it's the teacher being considerate about the histories, cultures, and values of their students, and understanding that integrating those histories, cultures, and values is essential to engaging a diverse body of students. CRP puts students from a broad range of cultural backgrounds in the best position necessary to integrate coursework. By embracing CRP, and by my integrating it with the education I received, which was not very culturally relevant (but nonetheless valuable), I was bridging the divide between the middle-class, white, heteronormative education I received and students' own cultural knowledges and experiences.

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What, then, does it look like to bring CRP into a creative writing or composition classroom? What does it look like to do this while paying attention to all kinds of difference, including racial, ethnic, gender, *and* sexual difference?

One way this looks in my ENG 111 Literature and Composition class is that I select poems from a vast diversity of writers (race, culture, gender, countries of origin, etc.). We study Sylvia Plath alongside the Bronx's La Bruja and the groundbreaking Phillis Wheatley along with the barrier-breaking Sandra Maria Esteves; Maya Angelou, Natasha Tretheway, and Tim Seibles can have a conversation about Blackness in America; while Emily Dickinson and Tupac Shakur can muse about love and perseverance; Adrienne Rich can talk excitedly about a lover's body while Kim Addonizio traces the outlines of her lover's tattoos; Pablo Neruda can praise his queen while Audre Lorde urges us to praise and value all of our identities; and Melvin Dixon reminds us of the peril of AIDS as Theodore Roethke shares the menace and fun of dancing with his drunk papa.

Students experience works that reflect themselves together with works that may introduce them to a new experience. They see that a poem by the Bronx Dominican/Greek lesbian writer J. Skye Cabrera earns the respect and proximity to the great Sonia Sanchez; and that the work of Palestinian-American poet Suheir Hammad is as valuable as the lauded Nikki Giovanni, that the cultural experience of W. B. Yeats is as valid as the cultural experience of Senegal's Léopold Sédar Senghor and that Dino Foxx's preoccupation with his gay lovers shimmers with Robert Frost's preoccupation with nature.

In the article "Meaningful LGBTQ Inclusion in Schools: The Importance of Diversity Representation and Counterspaces," written by Alison Cerezo and Jeannette Bergfeld and published in *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, there is a call to action to improve education and the school environment for LGBTQ students. Its recommendations are grounded in Critical Race Theories (CRT). CRT argues that if we engage with the direct and indirect impacts of racism on our experiences, we will contribute to social change around race. Scholars and writers Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic in the introduction to *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (third edition) write "Our social world, with its rules, practices, and assignments of prestige and power, is not fixed; rather, we construct it with words, stories and silence. . . . By writing and speaking against them, we may hope to contribute to a better, fairer world." CRT and CRP teach us that centering the work of Black writers—and discussions of their ideas and values—can constructively diminish fixed ideas of who we are as Black people; they can undermine anti-Black ideologies and anti-Black oppression. If this is the case for race, could it also be true for questions of gender and sexuality?

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When the student in my class shared that he hadn't had gay content in his classroom, it made me realize that even when race and gender are front and center, queerness can still be absent. Cerezo and Bergfeld highlight the importance of LGBTQ representation in scholarship and course content; they recommend addressing the presence and intersectional experiences of LGBTQ students and that "LGBTQ representation is one solution for improving school climate in that LGBTQ people have increased power to move school culture beyond the goal of tolerance to that of inclusion and recognition that LGBTQ individuals make valuable contributions."

Teaching Black, teaching queer, or teaching "other than white" requires that I act from my own personal experience and my gut. To support what my intuition tells me, I look for studies and articles to also support and validate the choices I make. This is especially important given that there is pushback against diversity and inclusion as a value that exists in academia—even at CUNY, a public institution—and there is a movement that persists on teaching a core curriculum to CUNY students. This is also urgent given that there is a history that has upheld whiteness and devalued Blackness in education. It is out of a sense of responsibility to all my students, from Black to white, that I purposefully diversify my syllabi in ways that center racial, gender, sexual, and cultural differences.

In the article "What Affirmative Action and Diversity and Inclusion Mean to Workers," Patti DeRosa states, "Affirmative action means if you come to the party, you can get in the door . . . diversity and inclusion . . . is what happens once you are inside the door." Those of us inside the door can go a step beyond diversity and inclusion, and CRP provides a roadmap for navigating the classroom in such a way that we can all "see" each other, "uphold" each other, and know that none of us are "too much," and that addressing the intersection of who we are as people allows us all to been seen and valued.

By reading and unpacking a poem by Maya Angelou or Pablo Neruda or Suheir Hammad or by connecting speeches by Sojourner Truth or Frederick Douglass to our lived lives, by going beyond the white canon, students of color receive implicit validation, and all students experience a greater world. And when we embrace the intersectionality of queerness with race and culture, our queer students also receive validation when we study works by Essex Hemphill, Gloria Anzaldúa, Barbara Smith, Alexander Chee, or Ana Castillo. In my creative writing classroom, students get assignments that urge them to go beyond themselves. There is one assignment called "Beyond me and my experience" where students must create a protagonist with at least three characteristics unlike themselves in terms of age, race, culture, economic class, sexual orientation, geography, and time period. It pushes them to create a three-dimensional experience that is other than themselves.

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I take this practice beyond my classroom and offer Queering the Classroom workshops at conferences like AWP and in a professional development series at my college where I've also developed the first Intro to LGBTQ Literature course where the offerings are in line with CRP practices.

That day, after having read *Giovanni's Room*, my students and I were able to slow down and use the text and the situation that arose in the classroom to go "off script" and speak about queerness in a greater and personal context. We walked away from a conversation where one student's homophobia—that he may not name as such—was challenged and he was able to come to a text he might not have otherwise. There were queer students who had their queerness affirmed. And there was a general sense in the classroom that there wasn't "too much gay shit" in the curriculum. My experience shows otherwise—that when there is a challenge of "too much" in my employment of culturally responsive pedagogy, it indicates that it probably isn't enough.

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